

**You Must Work Harder to Write
Poetry of Excellence**

**Crafts Discourse and the Common Reader
in Canadian Poetry Book Reviews**

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BookThug

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Secretary of Smash the State

Some influential, provocative articulations of position made by US-American poet Kenneth Goldsmith are through redefinitions of the type of work that poetry is, and the type of work a poet does. Goldsmith's critical writing continues to attract controversy in Canada and the USA, partly by how his re-figuration of the idiomatic labour of the poet challenges the discourse of craft. Rather than a specialized virtuous labourer or artisan, Goldsmith's poetic worker is a hybrid of wage slave and out-law. He writes that:

[C]ontemporary writing requires the expertise of a secretary crossed with the attitude of a pirate: replicating, organizing, mirroring, archiving, and reprinting, along with a more clandestine proclivity for bootlegging, plundering, hoarding, and file-sharing. We've needed to acquire a whole new skill set: we've become master typists, exacting cut-and-pasters, and OCR demons.... There is no museum or bookstore in the world better than our local Staples. The writer's solitary lair is transformed into a networked alchemical laboratory, dedicated to the brute physicality of textual transference. ("Information Management")

Goldsmith's counter-romantic poet here makes him/her something like an embezzler, with the skills and insider knowledge of the secretary and opportunist morality of a pirate. Goldsmith's poet has a pirate's eye for opportunities of cultural context that can be "seized" through the long drudgery of menial informatic tasks. His poet is not a scrupulous watch-

maker; he/she shovels linguistic compost from one context to another. Writing is the “brute physicality of textual transference” involved in moving found texts into contexts where they will be read aesthetically. While a secretary is a highly skilled but servile, information-management wage worker, the pirate is an economic parasite. Neither are economically productive as such, unlike, say, a carpenter or potter, blacksmith, painter or carver, who produce substantial goods for sale. A secretary (merely) manages information, produces nothing new. The pirate, an anarchistic outcast, steals, scavenges, or eats carrion. In spite of the secretary’s high level of skill, neither can he/she hope for the *it’s-a-job-well-done!* end of the day moment of the satisfied artisan. This very alienation is part of what makes him/her a potential interloper, a risk of turning pirate/embezzler. Both might be believed, prejudicially, by mercantile aesthetic conscience, to be basically lazy.¹⁶ The secretary is forced to work extremely hard, yet may be believed to lack the virtuous self-motivation (basic spiritual diligence) of the craftsman. A pirate personifies out-and-out carnal sloth and appetite become sheer criminality. Goldsmith also shifts the fantasy site of poetry away from the legendary places of exquisite toil or sublime craftsmanship, away from the great museum of the Tradition. Rather than a literary museum (legendary past achievements, sacred objects, a materialized body of knowledge), a Staples store, as the site of poetry production, suggests the culturally nihilist amnesia of corporate capitalism. Not accidentally, Goldsmith figures the fantasy site of “contemporary writing” – antagonistic to poetry even in name – as a warehouse-sized space full of cheap office supplies, blank paper and computer hardware.

Goldsmith’s ultra-postmodern poet is categorically antagonistic to the poet of crafts discourse. This antagonism is not only a question of the employment obligations of the craftsman poet, but of the obligatory

16 Recall, in this context, the racist stereotype of the *lazy slave*.

aesthetic identification of poet with the form of labour poetry is, and with its ethos. The fuller harmonizations of aesthetic conscience performed in some reviews require that this identification be total. Morality of the job becomes equivalent to the morality of the jobber. From this identification, mediated by the assumption that poetry expresses preformulated meanings, the form of the poetry under review takes on sharp moral significance. Reviewers often make judgements as if a living poet's entire morality can be inferred from his/her compositional decisions. These inferences sometimes slide into *ad hominem*. The book of poetry judged as bad must have been written by a bad person, if not a morally ill person. The book of good poems is the work of someone ultimately good (even if "flawed"), aesthetically virtuous, Human. Assumptions about the relationship of work and value further ground this chain of identifications, both in that labour turns into a poetic value fetish, and that, consequently, labour as such ritualistically (magically) imparts value to an object. To make such value discursively legible, however, it has to be possible for reviewers to frame certain features of poetry as the legible, obvious traces of good labour. Without a reciprocating gaze, the value is never realized, never concretely enters the cultural field. As David Ormsby characterises a poet's life: "Hard work, little recognition" ("Poet's Life"). The poet peers into a void.

In "Conscience Doth Make Subjects of Us All," both a critique and vindication of Althusser's theory of interpellation, Judith Butler finds in "the lived simultaneity of submission and mastery" (15) a crucial point of transfer between the logic of accumulation and the skilled labourer's work ethic. Among the premises that ground the morality of aesthetic labour in the crafts discourse of poetry reviewing are residual Christian notions of sin and innocence. Butler argues that:

The reproduction of social relations, the reproduction of skills, is the reproduction of subjection, but here it is not the reproduction of labor [sic] that is central, but a reproduction proper to the subject, one that takes place in

relation to language and to the formation of conscience. For Althusser, to perform tasks 'conscientiously' is to perform them ... again and again, to reproduce those skills, and in reproducing them, acquire mastery. 'Conscientiously' is placed in quotation marks ... thus bringing in to relief the way in which labor is moralized.... If the mastery of a set of skills is to be construed [as Althusser does] as an acquitting of oneself, this mastery ... will constitute a defense of oneself against an accusation, or, quite literally, a declaring of innocence on the part of the accused. To acquit oneself 'conscientiously' of one's task is, then, to construe labor as a confession of innocence, a display or proof of guiltlessness in the face of the demand for confession implied by an insistent accusation. (16)

In poetry reviewing, the "insistent accusation" levelled is of writing bad poetry. However the poetry in question is finally judged, the redeeming, answering confession is that *poetry is hard to write and I have worked hard at writing this poetry*. A poet can only pre-emptively acquit him/herself by building into his/her poetry features which appear to signify the hard work it cost to write. In the consciences of some reviewers, diligence almost comes to equal quality. The formula is: work harder = write better. Aesthetic conscience, in these terms, must forcefully maintain the assumption (verifiable or not) that good poetry is difficult to write. An entire mode of value would collapse if it ever emerges that poetry is easy to write, or if poetry somehow (by computerized automation, for example) becomes easy to write. Ultimately, poetry has to appear to have been difficult to write in order to be judged good.¹⁷

Deeply implicated in poetry's endless "crisis of self-justification" is the mystery of how exchange value accrues to cultural objects. The symbolic value of a cultural practice like poetry (somehow prestigious yet without

17 Difficulty is often inferred from the sprezzatura of the virtuoso: i.e., "she makes it look so easy...." Actual practitioners may take virtuosic ease as a sign of intensive, long rehearsal.

significant remuneration) is not easily translatable into economist terms of exchange value. Yet, with economism as a cultural dominant, ideological pressures to make that difficult translation are one of the motivators in the reviewer's aesthetic conscience. The solution many turn to is the "declaration of innocence" made to economist morality through this valuation of writerly labour, as an attempt to translate the insubstantial *illusio* of poetry (as language) into that of capitalist economics. Here, as Barthes says, "labour replaces genius as a value." The poetry is better because the poet worked harder; the social constitution of culture is reified to representations of individual exertion, effort, strain. The field vanishes from view, along with the concrete struggles that constitute the whole historical process of value creation. As Robert Lowell wrote so backhandedly to Theodore Roethke: "One of the things I marvel at in your poems is the impression they give of having been worked on an extra half day" (qtd. in McClatchy xxiii). At a not too rare extreme, reviews treat the poem-object as if it stores labour energy like a rechargeable battery, inadvertently reproducing something like the labour theory of value. As Marx writes in *Capital*:

A use value ... has value only because human labour in the abstract has been embodied or materialised in it. How, then, is the magnitude of this value to be measured? Plainly, by the quantity of the value-creating substance, the labour, contained in the article. The quantity of labour, however, is measured by its duration, and labour time in its turn finds its standard in weeks, days, and hours. (15)

To the degree that this value accumulates through labour, the poet buys his/her innocence, buys quietude of aesthetic conscience. Poets who receive negative reviews can reassure themselves that, in spite of all that, they worked hard, they did their best.

While poetry reviewers often articulate their adjudicative mandate as a guild-protecting practice of quality control, reviewing more often

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